

HALF-PAST TEN¹

By ALICE L. TILDESLEY

From The Black Cat

“**T**HAT’s the child.”

They sighed and shook their heads. One of them wiped her eyes on her faded shawl; the other passed a needle-pricked finger over Rhoda’s short, brown locks. Apparently, it was very sad that she was “the” child. Rhoda backed away toward her grandmother’s knees.

Old Mrs. Varden did not even look up from the coat-seam she was basting with the furious haste of the piece-worker.

Rhoda slid to the floor and took up the bit of soiled rag that did duty as “Meely,” her beloved doll. She was accustomed to being left to her own devices.

“She does n’t know?” speculated one of the callers.

“Ain’t it terrible?” countered the other, after a blank silence had convinced them that Mrs. Varden would not reply.

Rhoda took stock of them from beneath her straggling fringe of bangs. They were talking about her. What was it that she did not know?

Her grandmother bent over the endless seams, her lips drawn in until one could not see her mouth,—only a deep gash in the pallid face. The neighbors sighed again and murmured to each other. Curiously enough, it seemed that they were almost enjoying it—whatever it was. They had to sit on the little steamer trunk, be-

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cause Mrs. Varden and the pile of finished coats occupied the two chairs. Why a steamer trunk? Rhoda had often wondered. There was never a reason for anything. The gas jet gave such a queer flaring flame because there was water in the gas. How did it get there? Another of those things you'll never know. Rhoda stealthily took a pin out of the coat on her grandmother's lap and began to dig the dirt out of the cracks in the floor, wiping them afterwards with the lower end of Meely. It was a fascinating occupation. Rhoda indulged in it whenever she was so fortunate as to have a pin.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and the two women on the trunk turned their eyes to the door. Rhoda scrambled to her feet, losing the priceless pin, and rushed to meet the woman who entered.

The younger Mrs. Varden was attired in a cheap, flashy, checked suit. There was a willow plume of a vile purple in her shabby hat. Long earrings — ten cent store variety — dangled almost to her shoulders. Her face was coated with a white and red liquid concoction that entirely obliterated expression. But her eyes had the red rims that betokened nights of weeping.

She greeted her child with an absent pat. It might have been a little dog that rubbed against her. Rhoda thought her mother surpassingly lovely.

"It ain't a bit o' use, Mom," the younger Mrs. Varden was saying, "Al says y' can't see the Guv'nor fer love or money."

Her mother-in-law did not pause in her work. Only a queer little shudder showed that she had heard.

"Ain't there nothin' we can do?" asked the woman in the shawl.

"Nope."

Young Mrs. Varden crossed the room to the unmade bed and sat down on it with a little groan.

"What time will it be, Lu?" persevered the other.

"Ha' past ten." She swallowed, hastily. "It was ha' past nine when me and Al came up the street. He's

waitin' at the drug store for 'em to telephone him when it's — all over."

"Who'll 'phone him?" The callers were deeply impressed.

"One o' the reporters. They was hangin' 'round already when me and Al was there. This one was real decent. They would n't leave me see him, Mom!" She raised her voice plaintively, as she turned to her mother-in-law. "They would n't leave me say anythin' to him. There was a priest in with him then. This here fella says — this reporter fella — he says we did n't go *at* it right or they'd 'a' let me see him just once."

There was a little pause. Rhoda sat at her mother's feet and held Meely close to her bosom. The eyes of the visitors still held that odd, mournful joy. The elder Mrs. Varden threaded another needle.

"She don't seem to miss her Pop, does she?" said one of the sympathizers, indicating the child. "Don't she ever ask for him?"

Lu moved impatiently. "Sure, she misses him," she contradicted; "she ain't much of a kid for fussin'. There *is* somepin' you might do, now I think of it, Mame. Y' might rustle up a little gin fer me 'bout ha'-past ten. Now, Mom, y' need n't look like that! A little gin won't hurt me. Y'd better have some yerself. You might watch fer Al, too, if y' wanta, Mame. He's goin' to let me know if — if anything happens."

The two women departed, whispering.

At once Lu started up and began to pace the floor, suddenly garrulous.

"Al says it ain't a bit painful. He says it's all over so soon he won't hardly know what happened. We tried to get 'em to let me speak to him, but they would n't. They say he don't seem a bit sorry. He don't talk none — not even to the priest. That's like you, Mom. That's where he gets that from. Al kinda hoped we'd get at the Guv'nor after we heard he'd come to town, and we tried. He's stayin' at the Westwick. My, but it's grand

in there! We waited fer a while in a room where the rugs was as thick as grass — an' little gold chairs! He's got an attack of grippe, they said,—the Guv'nor has,—but the man said it was too late fer him to act, anyway. That reporter fella was awful decent to us. He took my picture, and he says it 'll be on the front page."

"Where's my papa?" asked Rhoda, suddenly.

Her grandmother looked down at her, slackening her needle without stopping it.

"Do you want him, Baby?" she asked, huskily.

Rhoda frankly did not want him,—a dark, gloomy man, subject to fits of rage, as she remembered him. She shook her head. Her grandmother sucked in her lips again and bent over the sewing.

The younger woman laughed harshly. "You see!" she shrugged.

"Wonder if Al's got any money," continued Lu, presently. "I'd really ought to have black after — after —"

"Why should Al give you any money if he had it?" demanded her mother-in-law. "He's done enough taking you all over town. What's Al to you? And Jim — any minute now."

"Al's a friend o' mine. He's all right, Al is. Y' need n't go thinkin' anything about us, neither. We're straight. Jim! Huh! What did Jim ever do fer any of us?"

"You let up on Jim!" returned the elder woman, almost fiercely.

"Yes, and why should I — whadda I owe to Jim?" Lu's voice rose shrilly. "Whadda any of us owe to Jim? Ain't he took all your money and brung you down to sewin' on them rags? Ain't he drank up every cent y' raised? Ain't he kicked that kid about so's she don't care if she never sees him again — an' the Lord knows after ha'-past ten she never will! Ain't he made my life miserable? Ever see him spend a cent on me for ten years? No. He was too busy drinkin' and hangin' 'round them low saloons!"

"Hush! He's going to die."

"Yes, an' what fer? Fer shootin' down a kid not much older 'n his own here. Just shootin' him down fer pure devilment."

"You don't know. He always said he did n't do it." The older woman's hands were shaking so that the needle traced a zigzag course along the seam.

"Oh, I'm tired o' pretendin' I think he ain't guilty. Gawd knows I've gone snivelin' to every Judge I could find, swearin' I had the best husband a woman ever had, and that he could n't 'a' done a dirty trick like that — an' all along knowin' it was just like him! Bah! Did n't I cry like a baby to the Guv'nor's man this very night — all so 's he could git out o' bein' punished for sompin' we all know he done? But I'm through. Al says to me, he says, 'You're a fool to take on about a fella that's been as low-down as Jim,' he says."

Rhoda began to whimper. She was not a child to cry noisily. Her mother reached under the bed for a battered tin box, took out a piece of cake, pale and soggy, and thrust it into the child's hands. Rhoda seized it and, having rubbed it across Meely's upper half, began to devour it.

"Jim was a dear little baby," put in his mother. "He had a dimple in one cheek —"

"Jim's used you mean, Mom. There goes quarter past ten. Wonder if that clock's right? Jim ain't been square with any of us."

"Jim never lied to me."

"No. But he did n't need to lie to us. We was all weaker 'n him. He did what he pleased and anybody that tried to stop him — huh!"

"Jim said he did n't do it." Jim's mother drew in a sobbing breath. "Oh, it is n't fair! Why can't I do something? Why have n't I enough money to make them listen? If Jim said he did n't do it, I believe him. It is n't right to kill him for something he never did! It is n't right!"

"He had a fair trial, all right, all right, Mom. Don't take on like that. Did n't I set down in the front row and do a Evelyn Nesbit over him the whole time? Oh, it was fair enough, two witnesses. My Gawd, Mom, don't take on like that! It ain't painful. Al says it ain't painful."

There was a silence, broken only by the long-drawn-out sobs of the older woman. Rhoda, Meely, and the cake disappeared under the bed, fearfully. The young Mrs. Varden sat on the steamer trunk and gazed straight ahead of her, a hard little smile frozen on her face.

So the minutes dragged by.

At last the big clock on the square began to strike the half hour.

The grandmother threw up her head to listen.

"Oh, God, why don't *you* do something? He was my little boy — my baby! And he did n't do it, God! He did n't do it. He says he did n't do it."

"Don't, Mom, don't! It won't hurt him. Al says it's all over in no time. It ain't a bit painful."

The last stroke echoed along the deserted street. The old woman dropped her work and threw herself forward on the shaky table, racked with sobs. Her daughter-in-law strained her ears for the sound of Al's footsteps. It seemed a long time before she heard them — lagging along the pavement below, lagging up the broken stairway, stopping at the door.

"Fer Gawd's sake, Al —"

Al leaned against the door jamb and removed an habitual cigarette.

"All over," he announced, briefly.

"Did he ask —"

"Nope. Never a peep out o' him. It was all over in no time. Did n't have to give him extra juice, either — first volts done fer him."

"Y' hear that, Mom? It did n't hurt him. Don't take on so, Mom! It's all over. See, Al says it did n't

take no time. Poor Mom, she's all in! Did he say anything to that priest, Al?"

"Said he did n't do it. Nothin' else. He did n't seem to be much interested, the guy said," replied Al. "We kin take the body if we wanta, in a coupla hours."

The woman with the shawl tore into the room.

"Some fella wants Al at the 'phone down to the drug store," she panted. Lu followed the departing Al down the stairs.

The room was very still. The old woman lay across the table, motionless, one hand hanging over the edge, like a dead hand. Rhoda peered forth, stealthily; then, growing bolder, crept a trifle nearer the door.

A rush of feet on the stairs, and Lu darted into the room, with Al at her heels.

"Mom! Mom!" she cried wildly, "listen, Mom! He did n't do it. You was right. Jim did n't do it."

The older woman raised her head. Her eyes looked dazed.

"One o' them witnesses — Mom, you remember the fella with the limp? — it was him done it. He grabbed Jim's gun and done it. They was all drinkin'. Jim was too drunk to remember anything."

"He wrote to the Guv'nor, special d'livery," broke in Al, "and then shot hisself. He was a dirty —"

"The Guv'nor never got the letter till ha'-past ten. And he tried to reach 'em, but it was — it was all over. Oh, Mom!" she sobbed hysterically.

The older woman slowly clasped and unclasped her hands. A world of mute agony was in her face. Rhoda pulled at her skirts and she suddenly seized the child and crushed her to her bosom, burying her face in the rough brown locks.

Al ran his eye over them, callously.

"So that's the kid, hey? — and his Mom. Poor old gal, tough on her. But what you howlin' fer, Lu? Would n't it 'a' been hell if the Guv'nor had got that note sooner?"

Lu continued to sob. The woman with the shawl brought in the gin. Lu and Al drank, she still sobbing fitfully. Then she turned to the others. Old Mrs. Varden had taken up another coat. Her needle flashed in and out at a furious pace.

Rhoda was on the floor again with Meely. She was absorbed in a most fascinating occupation. She had found another pin.

Lu turned again to Al.

"If that's a extra them boys on the street are callin', I wisht you'd git me one," she said. "That fella said my picture'd be on the front page."